

The Last Days of Charum Hakkor

by Chris000

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Summary: It is the end of the Human/Forerunner War. It is the end of our fight, and more importantly, it is the end of my race's days among the stars. We have been pushed back to our capital. We have been pushed back to the place where we were the strongest. Fifty years of defense made me grow proud, but now that pride will end us. This is the recollection of Forthencho, Lord of Admirals.

1. Chapter 1

A/N: This is an interesting opportunity following the release of the current two Forerunner saga books and the Halo 4 terminals. In my research, I've noticed that there's an extreme lack of stories that follow Ancient Humanity, and I wanted to try and dip my toe into that brand new environment, especially in the technologically heavy society in which Forthencho originated from. This has a very rich opportunity for me to explore what happened at Charum Hakkor and get creative with their societies, since very little of Ancient Human culture and military is explored in either the books or the games. I think it would be fun to envision the Lord of Admirals participating in these battles with named crew, expanded upon ship, and locations on Charum Hakkor proper before its destruction and rediscovery by the Didact and Co. nine thousands years later during the events of Cryptum! Read and enjoy! I would appreciate any criticism about this since this is a brand new direction I have never taken with the story! Did I do a good job? What could I have done better?

* * *

><p>Last Days of Charum Hakkor
C.R.V.

Many, many years agoâ€¦|

I was once a man who commanded thousands of ships. I was a man who had the fate of Humanity in my hands. I pushed my enemy to the very brinkâ€¦| but that was not enough. I fought for fifty years if not

more in defense of our capital! The orb of Charum Hakkor would not fall! I told myself that Humanity would endure! We would survive!

Butâ€¦ these were optimistic thoughts. I was not thinking as a tacticianâ€¦ not as a warrior, but as a man who saw defeat and wanted to deny the inevitable.

My name was Forthencho. They once called me The Lord of Admirals.

Just recalling the title alone would make my chest swell with pride. I can recall the vessel I stood in command overâ€¦ yes, yes, I can. It was the Grand Cruiser _Tara-Neede_, the pride of Charum Hakkor. With it were the finest warriors I could ever hope to serve with. They fought valiantly as we stared down the barrels of Forerunner weapons that were bearing down on us. The pilot, a distinguished man named Podom Domed ducked and weaved us under their hard light weapons. He was a natural, as if the ship was attached to his very body.

We were full of energy. We were full of morale. Even the navigations officer, Deckmaster Lodemathan, Chief of Signals, whom was usually stone-faced, smiled as he reported the apparent retreat of our enemies.

"My Lord, the Forerunners are pulling back! We've held the line!"

"Calm yourself, Deckmaster!" I growled to him, "The Forerunners have pushed for decades against our defenses, as constant as a tide. They wouldn't pull back now without throwing something more powerful at us."

My wisdom was to be heeded, for as the tide pulls back, there is always the danger for a monstrous wave that dashes against the rocks, tearing up homes, and sweeping away your loved ones. It was like the tsunami that the Forerunners threw one last attack at us. Lodemathan spotted them and barked their presence to me.

"My Lord, Slipspace ruptures appearing outside the Great Debris Field!"

That was the name the other Admirals gave to the ring of trash, metal, and bodies that circled our capital world. For fifty years or more, the Forerunners dashed themselves against our planetary defenses, and we kept them at bay. Occasionally, our ships would join the Great Field too. There were others encircling Charum Hakkor, but only this one was bright enough to be seen from the surface.

"_Fifteen hundred Promethean vessels making a run for Sector Five! By the Ancestors! They're coming in full force_"

"I the Second Prime Fleet to move into position guard Sector Five!" I ordered, professionally of course. "Seventeenth Assault Picket remains behind the _Tara-Neede_ to provide long range firing support!"

"_This is the _Chudad! _A second fleet is approaching the polar

regions! They've got us surrounded!_"

"Lock down that area!" I barked. "Coordinate with lead vessel and fire at will! Push the bastards back! Don't let them set foot on our world!"

"_It will be done, My Lord!_"

Again, I spoke with the air of a much younger man. I saw thousands of lances of energy fly into space over the edge of the world, and I saw flashes of light where they lanced the Forerunner ships. I smiled as I thought of the Prometheans burning to death, knowing they came all this way to die."

The Deckmaster sounded off to me. "Lord of Admirals, the Weaponsmaster has informed me we have a lock. Shall I instruct him to fire?"

"Let them see if their Mantle can protect them against the fury of the _Tara-Neede_! Fire!"

"I will obey!"

So we sent them a beam as a means of welcoming the latest group of Forerunners to our capital world. I stood soundly as I waited for a report.

"Scans showing a hit." Lodemathan reported. "We've crippled fifteen ships in the beam's path."

"Order the rest of the fleet to engage at their discretion, Deckmaster."

"Yes, my Lord!"

Particles and plasma boiled in the void spreading in all directions. The Forerunners themselves fired back, blowing twelve Prime Cruisers to atoms. I realized with horror that some of their shots were intentionally missing the Fleet, instead, they were aimed at Charum Hakkor itself. My heart was within my throat as I brought up an image of the surface. Fires raged across the Djudalos Great Forest, which was slowly becoming a legend. The city of our ancestors, Parad Hakkor was alit from the fire of our enemies.

So, it had come to this.

Whatever composure I had was gone. The weapons of our enemies had now tasted the ancient cities of our forefathers. Now that they saw a break in our defenses, they were ready to sink their claws into our home.

I wouldn't have it.

"Instruct Lord Captain Fathacolor to move his shield ships to encase areas over their attack vector! I will NOT accept anything other than loyalty now, Deckmaster!"

"Working as hard as I can!" the Chief of Signals said. We were only twenty minutes into this latest wave and we were beginning to falter. We sent out distress calls, please to any of our neighboring fleets

that were not here. We needed help, and we needed it fast.

The ship's computer indicated that we lost twelve additional defense platforms. The Forerunners had opened up a corridor over twelve hundred kilometers long in one particular area. That was unacceptable!

"Pilot, move us and the First Fleet towards the breach in the sphere! Weaponsmaster, order all batteries to fire at will on Forerunner smallships!"

"Aye, my Lord! All batteries answering to your command!"

The rumbling within my ship became even louder as shots from every single gun on the Tara-Neede fired at whatever was closest. I saw the massive Fortress-class vessels that the bastards commonly used. It was one of the largest in their fleet, fifty kilometers long with cannons that fired light itself. I saw it blow an entire Attack Column away. Fifty thousand men died in a blink of an eye, and I was helpless to watch.

In my ignorance, I didn't feel the deck lurch at first. I didn't feel my head slam off the deckhands. One of the guards helped me up. "What happened?" I demanded.

"We have been hit, Lord!" a deckhand responded. "We're losing atmosphere three kilometers aft! We're working to repair the leak now!"

"What hit us?"

"Forerunner Fortress-class vessel, the Daring Advance."

"That's one way to put it!" I growled, rubbing my head. "Order Group 2 to fire on that ship!"

"Firing!" one of the ship commanders responded. An antimatter barrage was all it took to bring one of the biggest ships in the Forerunner fleet down. It cracked amidships and spun in space, slamming into smaller picket cruisers. I laughed at the violence.

For the first hour it seemed we were holding our ground. The first Forerunner fleet was holding position around the twentieth parallel, but I was not prepared for the second massive portal to open up not far from where the first did.

The voice I heard over the communications was that of a friend, Captain-Admiral Judod Bashadanu. "Another Slipspace portal! This one's bigger! I want the Subprime group behind me at all times! Stand by to-" his voice cut off as a faint beam of hard light streaked from the gash in space. It didn't take long to get the report. The Captain-Admiral's Grand Cruiser was destroyed the instant his instruments determined a lock had been placed on them. No less than ten Fortresses crossed into our space spilling smallships over our slowly dwindling fleet. I could not find a place where I could see the stars anymore. All I could see were energy discharges, and the free-floating hulks of our spacecraft. I couldn't bear to look at the every-growing list of casualties that had numbered over a million now. I wondered if we were able to inflict the same numbers on their

side. I don't think I'd ever know then or now.

"Orders, my Lord?" Pilot Podom asked. He looked at me with distant eyes and with a sweaty face. I could see him trembling in his harness, but I could not let myself show the same insecurity. I could feel it though in the bottom of my heart that we might lose this day. It was a real possibility that we could lose Charum Hakkor.

No. I wouldn't let her fall, dammit!

"They want to charge? We'll give them a charge. Order First through Twelfth Subprime sections to push up and meet the advance!"

Lodemathan met my eyes. "That's suicide, my Lord! There's no way that even twelve sections can match almost twenty _Fortress-class_ vessels! We'll need _Behemoths_!"

"We have no _Behemoth_ _vessels_ closeby." I said longingly. "Will the sections do damage to the enemy."

The Chief of Signals ran the numbers. "Yes. I count five losses for the Forerunners, but I am showing a complete loss for the attacking Sections."

"What if we add more?"

"Then we ourselves will be unprotected. Lord of Admirals, I do not suggest this."

"Give the order. The men are prepared for this."

Lodemathan looked at me for a second, but then steeled himself. "It is done, my Lord."

I saw the ships' engines flare at once. Twelve sections, over a hundred vessels made for the attacker's line. Along the way they fired every weapon they could, and when they were out of weapons, brave commanders sped their ships forward and detonated their drives, taking out dozens of Forerunner picket craft in the process. For forty long minutes I watched their advance while dealing with smaller craft in my region, but another Slipspace rupture opened.

By the third time I sensed the pattern. Always an hour apart; always a set number of ships piling through, but this portal was on the other side of the planet, where we did not have as many ships! I barked commands to as many commanders as I could, and their starships peeled in orbit over the edge of Charum Hakkor to meet the new waves of Forerunners.

Then I received a disturbing message.

"My Lord, one of the ships is attempting to contact you."

I scowled. "Which one?"

"We're tagging the ship as the _Mantle's Approach_."

The Last Days of Charum Hakkor: Chapter 2

"By the Ancestorsâ€¦ he's shown his face."

"My lord?"

"Bring him up."

I stood by the communications station, as Lodemathan keyed in the message. Slowly, a figure rose out of the projector. The commander of the very forces that I faced; a man that I had known for many years, and now, he was here to finish the job."

"_Lord of Admirals. Here we are on the battlefield of revolution._"

"Didact." I deduced. "I knew you would come."

"_Indeed?_ I had hoped to find you dead already, Human_." The Forerunner scowled. "_Look around you. The dead number in the millions, your ships burn, and slowly, I am already assuring that your cities, farms, and government itself suffers the same fate._"

"You waste your breath, Didact." I boasted. "No man before me will trouble himself your intimidation. We are above that. We are above the fear of death."

It was a lie, but I hoped that the Didact wouldn't see through it. We were all very much afraid that we would die here this day. The Forerunner scoffed and folded his arms. Parts of his armor bounced in the air. "_I had only heard that beasts like you were capable of honor. Until now I assumed you had only summoned the courage to stand on your hind legs and act as if the Mantle were yours. Maybe there is more use for you after all._"

"You will not have me!" I shouted. "I will die at the bridge of this ship before I become the pet of a Forerunner!"

"_You are already a pet, Lord of Admirals._" The Didact accused. "_But you haven't the intelligence to recognize it. All the better an irony to follow you to whatever I have in store for you. The choice is not yours. I will be arriving soon to ensure your kind does not upset the natural order of things anymore._"

The final thing I saw on the Forerunner's face was a look of amusementâ€¦ of superiority. "_Until we meet again, Forthencho, Lord of Admirals._"

Backup arrived, but I feared that there was little point to it after the Didact's ultimatum. More _Fortress_-class vessels arrived out of our formations and launched hundreds of boarding craft to take over other ships. More than three quarters of the ships I sent to combat the other vessels had been destroyed, and others had even begun a hasty retreat. They were blasted as soon as they turned to run. Within another hour, Subprime sections from 1 to 12 had been totally annihilated, and only achieving three of the five kills they were expected to gain.

The Tara-Neede stood though as a beacon for the other ships around her though. We fought all of them off as if we had the Ancestors themselves alongside us. Our shields took hits, but we pressed on. Our hull was dented and broken, but we pressed on. But the Forerunners had us in mass numbers where we couldn't be in spirit. Hour after hour they opened more portals revealing more ships. Thousands. Tens of thousands. More ships than I ever thought possible emerged from space.

Lodemathan stood at his position though, even as another blow broke his arm. He refused to be replaced, saying that he would die standing at his post than in a bed. I appreciated his enthusiasm even in the face of impossible odds. Young Podam moved the Tara-Neede with as much as a thought. Though we presented these outward expressions of confidence, we were dying bit by bit inside. We knew that the Ancestors may have been with us, but even They couldn't help us defend against what the Didact had thrown at us. The Forerunners were not interested in simple defeat, they were looking at extermination.

More waves, more deaths, more screams over the communications. I looked and saw the Mantle's Approach itself spearing one of the few remaining Grand Cruisers. There were five more of them. Five. We started with almost fifty Grand Cruisers, but after continued weathering by the Forerunner's mass attacks, we were pushed back further and further towards Charum Hakkor.

The Ballarsde, the Ruthless, the Halbarden, the Egidenlo, and the Harkener. No! The Harkener was gone, run over by one of the Didact's bootlicking ships. I did what any logical commander would do: I ordered more and more men to their deaths, hoping that we could ebb the flow of Forerunner vessels. Already I was receiving reports from the other fleets that Forerunner cruisers had broken through their defenses! The fools! If they had only planned better! If only they had watched their flanks!

But their failing was not without justification. Millions of tiny weaponships swarmed like bugs over frightened frigates as they lanced out to protect themselves. Warrior-Servants controlled them at a ratio of a million to one! Each one had their turn cracking at the ship until its lifeless and leaking husk drifted into Charum Hakkor's gravity and burned up. I shuddered to think on where this would land.

We were one of a handful of ships left. Traitors fled, but many of us died in the skies above the capital we were sworn to protect. It wasn't just the capital I was worried about, but the Ancient One we sent our best warriors to guard. Even that delusional fool Yprin Yprikushma, the Morale Leader for the whole Empire thought we would be able to hold on to it.

We ordered the fleet of a hundred behind me to follow our lead as we slipped across the horizon to hit a Forerunner battle group firing at ground targets. With a quick blast, our combined fire broke one of their Fortress vessels in two, and we made quick work of its escorts.

"Keep it up! We can have them beat if we stick to hit and run tactics!"

"We're still losing ships, My Lord!" Podam cried from his station. "Our best bet is to target their troop carriers and give the ground armies less to deal with!"

I ran to the scanners to see he was right. More damned Warrior-Servant weaponships were chasing us as we ran to attack them. Alright. It was time to get creative. "Chief of Signals, order the rearmost ships to flip around and serve as rear gunners, tell them to overload their weapon safeties and fire on any weaponship that dare approaches the fleet!"

"They won't last forever." I was told by the man's grave voice. His war paint shimmered with his sweat.

"Don't question my wisdom, Deckmaster!"

"I'm not, my Lordâ€¦ butâ€¦ we have lost so many ships already!"

"And we'll lose many more if we do not act! No do as I command!"

Lodemathan met my eyes for a short moment. "Iâ€¦ I will command, Lord of Admirals."

To this day, I wondered if those men are braver than I. I saw as they carried out the orders as I commanded. I saw fire streak from their hulls as they tried to overcome the millions of locust-like craft that stabbed at their shields and tore at their hull. One of the commanders detonated his vessel, taking out scores of Forerunner smallships. Ahead of us, we blasted through enemy ships like a plough through snow, but our morale was eliminated when we saw the next series of portals winked into existence.

"_No! No! Tell me this isn't happening!_" I heard a commander cry in horror!

"_Where do they get more ships?!_" another asked.

These thoughts went through my mind as well, but I dare not speak them to the crew. When the first assault started three years ago, ten million ships roamed the skies of Charum Hakkor. Nowâ€¦ "How many ships remain in the area?"

"In the solar system?" He saw the figure. "My Lord, only 22,000 remain."

A knife to the heart. Our fleet was only a fraction of what it was before. "How many defense stations?"

"Tenâ€¦" he paused. I expected him to continue.

"Tenâ€¦ hundred?"

"No, my Lord. Just ten."

Ten. _Ten_! There _was_ _no_ more orbital defense.

"How many ships keep coming?"

"Innumerable, my Lord." Lodemathan announced. "Smaller portals are continuously opening all over the area surrounding Charum Hakkor. Reports are unclear, but splicing together the numbers from other scouts I can wager that over five million ships are bearing towards the planet."

I actually weighed the odds. Twenty two thousand against five million. I've heard stories in my youth about small groups that were so determined they could hold their own against armies, but will had little use in the vacuum of space. Tactics, weapons, and hull density were all that mattered, and it seemed I was being countered at all fronts. Very well. If they wanted to have Charum Hakkor, they'd have to take it from me at the very end.

"Give the order to the fleets, Pilot. We're taking the _Tara-Neede_ into the atmosphere." I walked to my command station and braced for the sudden acceleration. Podam looked at me and said, "Sir, can the _Tara-Neede_ survive an entry into an atmosphere?"

"We'll be fine, Pilot. Now take us to ground."

I could imagine the Didact's surprise as we turned towards the planet. Perhaps he thought we were running away. No, this planet was our territory and we knew it best. Not to mention we could use the Precursor structures on the planet as cover, since conventional weapons would do nothing to them. Perhaps the Didact knew this.

Where there was void, there was air now. Burning black clouds whipped by us signaling the destruction that would follow. Out of the haze came one of the Towers of the Precursors. I found it odd that in our hour of terror, the artifacts of a race long gone would survive us. Some of the ships in the fleet took cover behind it and fired at some of the Forerunner vessels that pursued us. Some of it was to great effect, but the ships themselves were blasted as soon as the enemy realized what was happening.

Most of the Forerunners seemed to not even bother. They stayed in orbit raining down fire onto our cities. We should have stayed up there, but the meteors raining down in the distance changed my mind. I knew these fireballs were what was left of our fleet. They threw the carcasses down just to spite us.

"My Lord, the fleet's ready to make their stand at Parad Hakkor." Lodemathan had announced.

How appropriate. The fleet of Humanity making its last stand at the capital. I was ready for him. Come Didact! Forthencho will not bow to you in life, and certainly not in death!

The capital city lay on the edge of the Eastern Ocean. Precursor Towers extended into the distance and served as small fishing communities that harvested from the waters. Towards the land though were the great Palaces of Charum Hakkor where our government decided the fate of worlds. The Fleet held position, waiting for them. All the while, I expected a bolt from the heavens, but it seemed that the Didact had other plans. Perhaps he wanted to finish this man to man.

I received my answer. His ships descended from the clouds, still in

formation. Despite the death and destruction around me, it looked like tales from the old stories where two armies would face one another. Beams of light cut through the clouds and burned fleeing ships as they tried to run from the disaster. It seemed that billions would call this world their grave.

Still I waited for the instant death that never came. I knew what the Didact wanted though: Me.

The Mantle's Approach melted out of the fog. Its angled shape shunted aside the clouds.

Lodemathan caught my attention. "My Lordâ€¦ the Mantle's Approach is hailing us."

I walked to the front of the bridge and stared out over the ocean. I knew this water well. I grew up staring out across it as a child. I knew the Precursor Columns as they rose into the sky for kilometers. But today, this scene was as alien as any other world. Today, the ocean burned with tens of thousands of hulls of ruined starships. Many of them Human. Thousands of Forerunner vessels as well though.

"Very well, Chief of Signals. Let me speak to him."

"I will obey." He spoke.

The Didact's shade materialized. "_I am willing to offer you a last chance to surrender, Lord of Admirals. Your fleets have been annihilated. There is not one of your ships left to defend Charum Hakkor. If you allow your ships to stand down, I swear by the Mantle that I will not let my Prometheansâ€¦ punish you too harshly._"

I barked at the Forerunner, "I've seen enough of what the Mantle has done to us. The precious Mantle that you claimâ€¦ 'Shelters All'" I waved my hands, and the Didact scowled. "I've seen how you treat those inferior to you, when we were doing all we could to stop the Parasite before it got to you."

"_You took the Mantle upon yourself when you were clearly unworthy of it, Human._"

"All we sought was to save as many lives as we could."

"_You sought to destroy, as Humans always do._"

"And now YOU are the destroyers." I motioned to the Weaponsmaster. I held up my hand, telling him not to fire yet, but be ready. He responded with a nod. We were ready to fight if necessary, and it was looking likely that it would be necessary.

"_The Mantle shelters all, but it is up to you whether you want to feel its embrace._"

"You made it this far. You won't stop now."

"_Sacrifices must be made. Regardless, the galaxy will not weep for Humanity's passing._" Those strange quills on his head bobbed in anticipation. "_I have waited long for this moment._" He shouted in Digon, one of the languages used by his Prometheans. I couldn't speak

it, but I know what he said. Before I could give the order, Forerunner cruisers opened fire on our ships. Many winked out of existence in balls of fire.

"Move the fleet! Engage targets at your discretion!" I called out.

"Aye, My Lord! Transmitting!" Lodemathan nodded, bracing for the sudden acceleration. Pilot Podam fired up the engines, bracing at his station. The _Tara-Neede_ veered off following the coastline while our aft batteries pelted away at the Forerunner ships.

The Weaponsmaster communicated with teams all over the _Tara-Neede_. I could barely hear him as I shouted commands to Podam as he did his own job.

"Weapon station 15, correct your firing vector fifteen degrees! You are going wide with all of your shots."

"_Apologies, Weaponsmaster! We attained damage to our firing generators!_"

"Get it under control! We're taking hits along the hull!"

"_We're trying our hardest!_"

Within seconds, Weapons station 15 burst into flames, and the _Tara-Neede_ began to list.

"Fix it!" I called to Domad. The Pilot struggled not to fall down the tilted deck. "Fix it!"

"I'm trying, My Lord!" Podam urged. He overrode controls to emergency thrusters to bring the ship back into balance. Domad succeeded and blasted us over the battle fleet of the Forerunners. We scored many kills in the dogfight that followed. We made the Grand Cruiser partake in maneuvers that were more suited for a fighter less than a hundredth of the size. I held my breath as parts of our ship stopped only mere feet above the oceans.

3. Chapter 3

The Last Days of Charum Hakkor: Chapter 3

Seven hours in. More cries of landing craft appeared all over the city, and even the planet itself. I thought of the Primordial and the seven thousand warriors that guarded it. I asked myself if anybody deserved the knowledge that that beast could provide. I came to the conclusion that no. Nobody did. Not even the Forerunners. The answers that that _thing_ gave were worthy of nothing but itself. I would not wish it on the most evil of the Ancestors.

The sun was gone, masked by smoke and the debris itself above us. Even though it would be midday in Padak Hakkor, it looked as if the gates of hell had opened right here. For all it seemed, that was exactly what happened.

"Picket cruiser right behind us!" the Deckmaster announced.

"I'll deal with him!" the Weaponsmaster answered. "Weapon station 20! Target what I'm giving you!"

"_It will be done, my Lord!_"

The cruiser next barreled over us with its body on fire. It tried to right itself and fire at us, but a Precursor column melted into view and the doomed cruiser slammed into it. Half a second later, we were past it, and back into the battle.

"Here comes the _Mantle's Approach_" Podam cried out.

"Take a shot at it!" I ordered. "Let the Didact know I am true to my word!"

"Aye, my Lord! Firing!" the Weaponsmaster announced. Both tubes of antimatter warheads towards the Didact's flagship. A massive explosion set out for kilometers as the reaction between mater and its opposite took place. That must have been a hundred ship kills. The shock rolled over our shields, but we rumbled somewhat.

"Chief of Signals! Check to see that the Didact has been killed!"

"Scanning!"

The clouds cleared, but I saw the answer myself. "No!"

The _Mantle's Approach_ kept on coming despite an explosion of incredible proportions. Being in atmosphere would only make it more powerful. But there it was, with shields crackling. All the ships around it though had been cleared.

"Confirmed delivery!" I count thirty thousand individual kills! _Mantle's Approach_ is unharmed. By the Ancestors..." Lodemathan breathed. "How do we stop that ship?"

"I knew it wouldn't be that easy." I growled. "Ready another shot!"

"Lord of Admirals!" the Weaponsmaster screamed, "Boarding pods inbound!"

"What?!" small dots blasted from his ship. In seconds, the ship shook as a deep clang sounded through the hull.

"They're on!" The Weaponsmaster screamed. "We're being boarded!"

"Why didn't our shields stop them?"

"I don't know!" the shocked officer looked over his instruments, trying to find an explanation for all of this. "I don't know!" all decks are reporting that the Warrior-Servants have invaded! Sir, they're firing on the crew."

That did it. They had forced their way aboard. It was going to come to this. "Captain!" I called. One of the bridge guards stood straight with arms to his side.

"My Lord?"

"We need to set up a defensive perimeter around the bridge. We leave this room, and we'll be dead. I want you to rally whatever soldiers you can, and defend the bridge. They want us alive."

The man's helmet dipped in obedience. "We will lay down our life for you, Lord." He looked around the bridge. "You will want energy shields to defend yourself. I will have a full group guarding this door. They shall not reach the bridge."

I smiled and placed a hand on his shoulder. I understood him because the thoughts that went through his head were the same ones that went through mine. We had little illusions that we would walk away from this. The Captain left some of his guards behind, and stepped through the blast door of the bridge. "My Lord?" I met his eyes. "It's been an honor to serve aboard this ship and defend Charum Hakkor."

"You do me proud, soldier." When the door closed, I knew it would be the last time I would see that man alive.

There was very little left to do. Some of the weapon stations continued to fire. We didn't give the order to stop them though. I wanted to give the bastards every last ounce of strength we had.

Every ship, even a Grand Cruiser had emergency shield walls that we could throw up in case of a boarding. I ordered blast doors closed on the windows, and the guards at the ready, aiming their rifles, just waiting.

The communications played the cries of dying men and women aboard the Tara-Neede who wanted help, but couldn't get it. I did not know what was happening in the outside world, and what was left of the capital city. I thought of my home in Hondorin, which was probably destroyed by now; just a crater as deep as all the others on this planet.

It was quiet. My men watched the door. I heard blasts though down the hall for what seemed like an eternity. I had my own weapon ready, as if I thought we would be able to hold the position. I knew it was over, but I had to make a decision. Would I be leaving alive, or dead?

An hour after the Captain had left, I was ready to make that choice. The shields were up, and the bridge crew was armed. The guards stood with weapons pointed ahead. They knelt to maximize their accuracy. No doubt the Forerunners were using breaching charges to get in. Less-essential bridge crew hid in corners of the room. I didn't stop them, but I wouldn't hide like a coward. I would see this through to the end.

With another bang, the door split open. Tall men with visors spilled in. They wore golden visors and moved like unnatural things from the great beyond. The first Warrior-Servants raised their own rifles.

"Drop your weapons!" one of them called in our language. "The Didact does not wish this to end in bloodshed!"

A guard found a burst of courage. "No! I won't let you take this bridge!"

But I stopped him. I grabbed the barrel of his gun and forced it lower. "No. If the Didact wants us alive, he will take us alive. This isn't worth losing your head over!"

"But we will die! I know it!"

"No. He will not kill us, even though it seems that way!"

I'm sure he was considering suicide, but this was the most dishonorable way to die. Any soldier who even considered blowing his head off would not be worthy to stand on this bridge. I unclipped my weapon and threw it to the floor.

"Look on the bright side, you'll get your deathâ€¦ but not today." I stepped forward, defiant, even in defeat. With a glance behind me, my men followed suit. The soldiers looked at their guns and then dropped them. My trusted officers, the young Podam, the burly Weaponsmaster, and the intelligent Lodemathan stood proud and walked with me into the arms of waiting Prometheans. I heard no shots afterwards, so the crew had found their honor as well.

Even though I could not see their faces, I was sure the Prometheans viewed me with disgust. I was the lowest of the low to them. I was the scum of the galaxy, and yet, I felt as if nothing could touch me. We fought with all of our hearts, and we lost.

When we boarded the craft to bring us to the Mantle's Approach, I was granted a look over Padak Hakkorâ€¦ what was left of it anyway. The capital city where our empire was once regulated, a city with towers that rivaled the Precursor structures was a burning mountain. Fires raged in a million different locations. But that wasn't what broke my heart. Not two minutes after we left the Tara-Neede, a bolt from on high intersected the Grand Cruiser. It flashed brightly for a second, but then shattered in flame and metal. I felt as if a part of me had died with that ship. One of the Warrior-Servants noticed the pain on my face.

"Your punishment begins with the destruction of your assets." He huffed in amusement.

Padom looked at the Forerunner soldier, "What will you do to us?"

"Silence, worm!" a senior warrior responded. "Those who disgrace the Mantle are not worthy of questions!"

The time aboard the Didact's flagship was one of the worst moments of my life, but the real horror came when we were brought to their capital. The fires of Charum Hakkor were far behind us, but the confines of some place beneath their capital seemed far more foreboding. I was herded with thousands of other survivors. Thousands out of millions. The slaughter hit me like a nuclear weapon as we were named the ships that were destroyed and how many were aboard them.

"The Tara-Neede! 29,478!" a herald called from somewhere in the room. "The Harrasser! 18,390! The Ch'esashi! 30,145!"

I wanted him to stop saying numbers. In the heat of the battle, the numbers were merely a detail, but after the fact, I recognized that every single number represented a life. A person, no different than me, who had a family, a home, and they were dead. In some ways, I wish I was like them, thinking that I was dying and that my sacrifice would mean a victory. Sometimes the dead were spoiled.

Then, he walked through the doors. He was here. The Didact stood out against the Prometheans around him. He was tall, easily four meters tall. To see him in person like this was quite humbling, especially without my uniform.

We had all agreed to get rid of our uniforms. We hoped this would confuse the Didact to go through everyone. An inconvenience to him, but he was able to find me. He spotted me out of the thousands gathered here. He came up to me with a smile.

"This was a place I wasn't expecting to see you, my nemesis."

"How did you find me?" I asked, enraged.

"Even by disposing of your uniforms, there are other ways to track a man. The way the others look at you, the way they respect you. These are not things that one can simply throw away. No, they are carried within our hearts as warriors." There was a moment where I felt he looked into my eyes, even though he was alien to me, we understood one another.

But then he was back to pacing around me. "Your punishment must be severe though. Your kind took the Mantle of Responsibility for All Things upon themselves. You forced your way into our space. You took worlds for your own, and killed those who stood in your way. Your hand alone has taken my children from me."

"Yet you still cling to their souls, unwilling to let them leave." I spat, referencing their Durances, which held what was left of their lives.

"You insulted our kind in life. I shall not allow you to insult them in death."

"But, as my wife has made it clear to me on many an occasion, we have our own problem. Your kind has faced the Flood, and you lived. I find myself in a rather difficult position. I would demand you to tell me of the Primordial, the Timeless one, whatever you may call it in the hopes it will aid us in the Flood."

"But you know I will refuse to speak." I said to him, weak from the fighting.

"Indeed, and rightfully so." He flared his nostrils. I could tell that he wanted to tell me something that gave him great pleasure. "But I have no need to make you talk, for your mind will be more than willing to speak for you."

I didn't understand, and he got down on his knee. Even kneeling, he was taller than I, and I was tall for my race.

"My finest opponent," he began. "the Mantle accepts all who live

fiercely, who defend their young, who build and struggle and grow, even those who dominate " as Humans have dominated, cruelly and without wisdom. It is a kindness you do not deserve, but it is something we are willing to extend to you, for your own good.

"But to all of us, there is a time like this, when the Domain seeks to confirm our essences, and for you, that time is now." He looked towards the hallway that he came from, and nodded. Machines shaped like wedges hovered down the hallway into the room we were in. A strange light pulsed on it. For some reason, I was frightened by this machine.

But he lowered his voice to the level a friend would even, "Know this, relentless enemy, killer of our children, Lord of Admirals: soon we will face the enemy that you faced and defeated. I can see that challenge coming to the Forerunners, and so do many others." He closed his eyes and got to his feet. " and we are afraid."

His pain in saying that, in admitting that to me signaled the danger of the Flood. My own kind met the Parasite, but by the Ancestors, we won. Now the Forerunners were seeking to gain the edge we had. The Didact was afraid? I tried my best not to smile. For fifty years of constant assault on Charum Hakkor, after millions of our own dead, and I was supposed to feel pity? Not on my life.

"But as I said before, your unwillingness to divulge the secrets of how you bested the Flood do not anger me. It would be what I would do if I were you" but it does now matter." The Didact ordered the machines to line up in a neat column. "That is why you and many thousands of your people who may contain knowledge of how humans defended themselves against the Flood, will not pass cleanly and forever, as I would wish for a fellow warrior, but will be extracted and steeped down into the genetic code of many new humans."

I looked to the machines in horror. Even though I did not know their direct function, I knew what the Didact intended to do with us. He saw the presence of fear in my eyes, but did not respond in jest or in spite.

"This is not my wish, nor my will. It arises from the skill and wish of my life-mate, my wife, the Librarian, who sees much farther than I do down the swirling streams of living time. So, this additional indignity will be inflicted upon you. It means that, I believe, that humans will not end here, but may rise again"fight again. Humans are always warriors. But what and whom they will fight, I do not know. For I fear the time of the Forerunners is drawing to a close. In this, the Librarian and I find agreement. Take satisfaction, warrior, in that possibility." He stood and turned to leave. "The war is over, Human. You may have lost this fight, but there will be more battles for your kind yet."

Before he left, I asked him what was on my mind. "You will not let us die? By what means?"

The Didact turned to look at me one more time. "It is not easy to describe to you, Lord of Admirals, but regardless, I extended you a courtesy of a life after this" I do not think you will wish to want the answer to this. Now, I leave you to sleep. When you awaken, if you do at all, you will find yourself serving a new masters, touching

minds you never thought possible, but for nowâ€¦ sleep."

I felt a prick at my arm. Drugs. Sedatives. By the time I realized it was happening, I was already feeling my lids becoming heavier and my body becoming sluggish. I was lowered onto a bed that was not there before, and there I lay. Before I closed my eyes for the last time in this life, I saw a bright flash of lightâ€¦ and then I was gone.

These are my recollection of the last days of the Human Empire, which I now tell to you. Learn from our mistakes, and learn that the Forerunners themselves were not without fault. Learn that nobody can stand at the top of all things and rule with a pure heart. We fought valiantly, bravely, with no fear of deathâ€¦ and the irony is that we were not granted deathâ€¦ instead, half-life. These are the last days of Forthencho, Lord of Admirals, Commander of the Last Fleets of Charum Hakkor.

End
file.